

Congressional Leaders Join with the U.S. Workplace Wellness Alliance to Highlight Importance of Worksite Wellness Programs

WASHINGTON, DC – In an effort to make wellness and prevention a part of the national discussion on health care reform, U.S. Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and



John Cornyn (R-TX) and U.S. Representatives Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) and Mary Bono Mack (R-CA) today reintroduced legislation which aims to fight the growing prevalence of chronic disease and improve the quality of life for the 135 million full-time and part-time workers in the United States. They were joined at a press event on Capitol Hill by representatives from the U.S. Workplace Wellness Alliance, who applauded the introduction of the bill.

The Healthy Workforce Act would provide a tax credit to companies that offer effective and comprehensive wellness programs. The legislation would permit businesses to receive a credit for incorporating sound employee health management practices into their plan design, and would significantly ease barriers for both small and mid-sized employers to make a sound investment. To receive this credit, programs are required to include components such as health risk assessments, health awareness and behavior change programs, meaningful incentives for program participation and an employee committee that tailors programs to meet workforce needs. “Health reform will not be complete without prevention and wellness being a center piece for fixing this broken system, the lifesaving and cost-saving benefits have been proven in study after study,” said Harkin. “With healthcare costs quickly increasing, it is no surprise that some companies report spending more than 50 percent of their profits to cover these expenses. Employer spending on health promotion and chronic disease prevention is a good investment. Studies have reported a proven rate of return on investment within 12 to 18 months, ranging from \$2 to \$10 for each dollar invested. . It simply makes sense to partner

with employers and leverage the place where Americans spend the majority of their waking hours – the workplace.”

“This legislation helps businesses provide a range of opportunities to help their workers lead healthier lives, particularly small businesses that otherwise may not have the resources to provide wellness programs to their employees,” said Cornyn. “Public health experts unanimously agree that people who maintain active and healthy lifestyles dramatically reduce their risk of contracting chronic diseases. I’m pleased to join with my colleagues, the American Heart Association and all other organizations in this effort to help employers promote physical activity and disease prevention.”

“Investing in wellness and prevention is an important part of comprehensive healthcare reform,” said Blumenauer. “Americans spend over half of their waking day at work, leaving them little time to pursue measures to promote a healthy lifestyle. With this bi-partisan, bi-cameral legislation we can help encourage companies to do the right thing. The answer doesn’t have to be complicated and with many companies struggling to cover rising health care costs, preventative health care is an easy way for companies to cut down on those costs, while increasing employee productivity and general workplace satisfaction.”

“Employer spending on wellness programs and prevention is a good investment for our nation’s economy and our nation’s health,” said Bono Mack. “As we look to reform our health care system, it is essential that we take proactive measures that will encourage Americans to live healthier lives, which will help reduce health care costs, improve quality of life and increase productivity in the workplace. I am proud to join my colleagues in this bipartisan effort and hope that this preventative approach will be incorporated as a part of broader health care reforms this year.”

An estimated 145 million American adults are overweight and 74 million are obese, placing more than a third of the working-age population at risk for chronic illnesses. The estimated cost of obesity and overweight related health conditions is \$117 billion per year. Health care costs in the United States doubled from 1990 to 2001 and are expected to double again by 2012. And just three chronic conditions, asthma, diabetes and hypertension, are associated with 164 million lost work days per year at a cost to employers of \$30 billion.

Worksite wellness programs are an important means of addressing the nation’s rising obesity rates, increasing prevalence of chronic disease and escalating health care costs, according to

the American Heart Association. A comprehensive wellness program can bring value and savings to employers in different ways through reductions in direct health care costs, proper healthcare utilization, increased performance measures, lower rates of absenteeism and lower prevalence of chronic disease or illness, the Association notes.

The U.S. Workplace Alliance, co-chaired by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Partnership for Prevention, is dedicated to the vision that a healthier U.S. workforce produces a stronger and fiscally healthier U.S. economy poised to compete in the global marketplace. It includes more than 75 businesses, health care advocates and nonprofit organizations, including the American Heart Association, American Hospital Association, National Business Coalition on Health and The Dow Chemical Company.

“Research demonstrates that healthy employees have fewer medical claims, are less absent, have less disability and have greater on the job productivity when compared to employees who have less healthy conditions and lifestyles such as obesity, physical inactivity and tobacco use,” said Randel Johnson, an Alliance spokesperson and Vice President, Labor, Immigration & Employee Benefits, U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

National Workplace Wellness Week is April 5-11, 2009. During the week, the U.S. Workplace Alliance is asking its members and private and public employers across the country to showcase how workplace wellness programs have succeeded in reducing employer health care costs and producing healthier and more productive employees. For more information, visit www.uswwa.org or www.americanheart.org/workplacewellness.

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